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ABSTRACT

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Implementing School Policies That Include Sexual Orientation: A Case Study in School and Community Politics

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Abstract

This article highlights factors that either facilitated or hampered the work of a local Safe Schools Coalition in advocating adoption and implementation of their school district's policies that include sexual orientation. Non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity are needed to help stop anti-gay peer abuse directed at gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer/questioning students. However, community opposition to the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in school policies frequently arises from morally conservative parents. Findings of this case are compared to a model of gay rights policy adoption that illustrates strategies the local Safe Schools Coalition used to effectively communicate their message, garner support, and effect change, as well as factors in the political and cultural climates of the community that either facilitated or impeded the adoption and implementation of the policies. A group of morally conservative parents opposed the policies and saw them as the school's promotion and legitimation of homosexuality. Advocates for the policies argued they were simply intended to "enhance safety." Opponents' claims are analyzed within a democratic and social justice framework.

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Introduction

The majority of openly identifying gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer/questioning (GLBTQ) students experience significant levels of violence, harassment and abuse in America's schools (Arriola, 1998; D'Augelli, 1998; Garofalo, Wolf, Lawrence, and Wissow, 1999; Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network, 1998a; Kielwasser and Wolf, 1994; Martin, 1996; Rotheram-Borus and Fernandez, 1995; Telljohann and Price, 1993). Furthermore, epithets like "dyke" and "fag" are frequently hurled at students, regardless of their sexual orientation, reinforcing adherence to stereotypical norms of behavior for girls and boys (Leck, 2000, p. 336). The deprecation and resulting marginalization of students based on their real or perceived sexual orientation, as well as their gender identity expression, robs them of the opportunity to participate fully in school and can retard their developmental growth into adults with positive self-identities (Macgillivray, 2000a). I contend this treatment is unjust and schools should take steps to stop it.

The law also provides incentive for school districts to stop anti-gay peer harassment. In 1996, Ashland, Wisconsin school district was ordered by a federal court to pay student, Jamie Nabozny, $900,000 for failing to protect him from anti-gay peer abuse (Nabozny v. Podlesny, 1996). Furthermore, the US Supreme Court ruled that schools can be sued under Title IX if districts fail to protect students from peer sexual harassment that can be interpreted to include harassment based on sexual orientation (Buckel, 2000, p. 394).

School policies that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity can help protect students from anti-gay peer harassment (D'Augelli, 1998; Friend, 1993, 1998; Lipkin, 1994, 1999; Owens, 1998) and help districts prevent lawsuits (Buckel, 2000). The facts that everyone has a sexual orientation and a gender identity and that such policies thus protect all students equally, are frequently overlooked with the focus instead on the charge that such policies give GLBTQ people "special rights." Moreover, charge opponents, the inclusion of sexual orientation in school policies ultimately leads to the inclusion of GLBTQ issues in the curricula, both of which help promote and legitimate homosexuality as being equal to heterosexuality, thus sending the message "It's okay to be gay." Therefore, the efforts of community groups and school districts to institute non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation are being met with staunch resistance, most

often by morally conservative parents in the community (Lipkin, 1999; People for the American Way, n.d., 1997; Swan, 1997). Howe (1997), describing "moral conservative" beliefs about school choice, explains that moral conservatives believe in a "morally best way of life" and want to "foster correct beliefs and dispositions in their children and to insulate them from the corrupting influences of modern society" (p. 110). In this study, of paramount concern to morally conservative parents is any threat to their autonomy as parents to instill in their children their anti-gay beliefs.

Several authors (Apple, 1992, 1993; Fullan, 1991; Sarason, 1971, 1996) discuss the often-contentious nature of educational change. There are also more pointed examples of educational change on similar topics such as proposed changes in teaching methods (MacKinnon, 2000) and instituting sex education (McKay, 1998). However, few studies detail the specifics of educational change in regards to sexual orientation. Thus, a greater understanding is needed of the complex process by which school policies that include sexual orientation are promoted, implemented, and resisted in America's schools and communities.

This article presents the preliminary findings of a case study (Macgillivray, 2000b) that focuses on the work of a community-based Safe Schools Coalition to ensure their school district's compliance with its non-discrimination policy. The Safe Schools Coalition also advocated the inclusion of sexual orientation in a subsequent policy, the district's Diversity Goal. Another community group, composed of morally conservative parents, Concerned Citizens, opposed the inclusion of sexual orientation in the district's policies. Findings from this case are compared to Button, Rienzo, and Wald's (1997) model of gay rights policy adoption, which highlights community-based factors that either facilitate or impede the implementation of laws and policies that include sexual orientation. The purpose of this research is to illustrate strategies employed by the Safe Schools Coalition in managing local factors that either facilitated or impeded their ability to advocate the district's policy and effect change. This research advocates school equity for GLBTQ students and provides guidance for coalitions in other communities to most effectively utilize political opportunities and other resources in advocating equal rights for GLBTQ students in America's public schools and to effectively educate or outwit opponents.

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Button, Rienzo and Wald's Model of Gay Rights Policy Adoption

Button et al.'s (1997) model illustrates the power (Foucault, 1984) of dominant groups in society which limits the ability of marginalized groups to challenge established norms (Berger and Luckman, 1966) and official knowledge (Apple, 1992) to effect social transformation. One of the goals of this research, to which Button et al.'s model is well suited, is to explicate the social and political factors that either facilitated or hampered the promotion, adoption, and resistance to a school district's policies that include sexual orientation. These factors will help describe the local characteristics and specifics of this case study. Based on a review of the literature, these authors provide the most comprehensive analysis of the process by which gay rights legislation is promoted, adopted, and resisted in American communities. I apply their model to my findings in the case of the adoption and implementation of High Plains School District's (HPSD) non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation. The authors' model analyzes local gay rights movements by examining the effects of four different local factors on policy adoption and implementation: (1) urbanism/social diversity, (2) political opportunity structure, (3) resource mobilization, and (4) communal protest.

Factor One: Urbanism/Social Diversity

Button et al.'s (1997) first factor holds that "large, diverse populations that are relatively more affluent are more likely to have gay rights legislation and to adopt innovative school programs" (p. 153). Also, "the urban setting is often conducive to the development of strong social networks… [where members] develop a strong sense of political commonality" (p. 15). One reason for this is the role that identity politics plays when larger numbers of GLBTQ people live in one area and organize politically for social and legal affirmation of their identities. Bailey (1999) explains, "affirmation is the centerpiece of identity politics. That is, the deep agenda for the movement is the affirmation of its identity, both collectively and individually" (p. 4).

Button et al. found that large communities with more ethnic diversity tend to have schools with more sexual orientation programming. Though the setting of this case study is not an urban center, the town has a well-established GLBTQ community and a history of supporting equal rights for its GLBTQ residents. This is discussed more in-depth later.

Factor Two: Political Opportunity

Button et al.'s (1997) second factor posits that opposing sides to any public debate often take advantage of local popular opinion and other political opportunities, many of which are not predictable. Button et al. contend, "school officials respond more to local than to state climates for political cues before instituting program change" (p. 154), although comprehensive state-level support was found to positively affect district-level program implementation in the one case where a state offered support. According to Button et al., there are many political factors that help sway popular opinion and provide political opportunities for instituting policies that support equal rights for GLBTQ students. One of these includes developing a supportive political opportunity structure within local government as well as within the school system. One example would be a school district's Director of Educational Equity and Multicultural Education. Another involves GLBTQ parents and straight parents of GLBTQ students who actively participate in school board and city council elections and the existence of GLBTQ people in significant school administration positions. Also mentioned were the support of government officials, community leaders, and a local GLBTQ Youth Support Group as well as the existence of a local university which often helps to foster a more liberal climate that supports inclusion of GLBTQ people (pp. 139-172).

Factor Three: Resource Mobilization

Button et al.'s (1997) third factor confirms "The importance of efforts by gay and lesbian organizations to stimulate the establishment of school-based interventions" (p. 160). The authors cite the importance of "mobilizing pioneers," highly motivated individuals who inspire others to form coalitions and work towards change (p. 161). Once a coalition has formed, its first task is one of "problem recognition"—raising awareness of the problem of anti-gay abuse in the schools and acceptance of the need to address the problem by implementing policies and programs to bring about equity (p. 162)." Policy and program advocates, such as the community-based Safe Schools Coalition, are often assisted by administrative proponents within the system and by students. GLBTQ students and straight student allies "are increasingly perceived as powerful advocates who can influence high-level officials" (p. 163). Next, advocates must demonstrate "program effectiveness" for the

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proposed policies or programs by identifying the need for it and establishing the "sufficiency of its theory, structure, design, staff expertise, resources and supervision," all of which are necessary for implementation (p. 164). Finally, advocates must provide a "cost-benefit analysis" to convince district policymakers "that programs will yield positive benefit-to-cost assessments" (p. 166). In sum, Button et al. cite as crucial the efforts of local coalitions of GLBTQ people and their allies, as well as GLBTQ individuals in powerful administrative positions, in taking advantage of opportunities to implement policies and programs that enhance equity and safety for GLBTQ students.

Factor Four: Communal Protest

Button et al.'s (1997) final factor pertains to opposition to proposed policies and programs from various segments of the community. The focus is to better understand the opposition so they can be outwitted or educated. Button et al. describe and discuss whom the opposition was in various case studies, how they were organized, and common themes and slogans in the oppositions' campaigns. Of little surprise was the first category of opposition—the religious community. More surprising was the other main category of opposition—the business community, who were concerned with protecting their rights as employers, i.e., not having hiring quotas, avoiding discrimination lawsuits and not having to pay for domestic partnership benefits.

Among Button et al.'s (1997) findings, they documented barriers to the development of policies and programs designed to increase safety and equity for GLBTQ students. Among these frequently encountered barriers were opposition by groups of morally conservative parents, fear of controversy that discouraged support from administrators and others who feared for their jobs, and fear of threat to school funding, i.e., the voting public killing levies in response. The authors also cited lack of incentives for administrators and others to address this issue, lack of unity on this issue within the local community, issues like teen pregnancy and drug abuse that compete for the time and attention of administrators, and "the failure to secure administrative support [on the part of GLBTQ policy advocates] was considered a key barrier to program development" (pg. 152).

In sum, Button et al.'s (1997) model can help identify barriers to the adoption and implementation of a district's non-discrimination policy as well as factors that facilitate or impede enforcement of the policy.

Applying Button et al.'s model to the findings of this case study will help highlight factors in the community that make this setting different from other settings, as well as tactics employed by the Safe Schools Coalition that helped to effect change, in light of opposition from Concerned Citizens.

Research Design and Methodology

Research Questions

An overriding research question for this case study is, "What specific events, attitudes, and other local factors either facilitated or hampered the adoption and implementation of the district's policies and how?" and is based on Button et al.'s (1997) model of gay rights policy adoption and their four factors that facilitate or impede adoption and implementation of gay rights policy. Other research questions were (1) "What strategies were utilized by the High Plains Safe Schools Coalition in managing the local factors mentioned in the first research question?," (2) "What strategies were utilized by the High Plains Safe Schools Coalition to build community and school district support for GLBTQ students?," and (3) "What are the worldviews (norms, official knowledge, and cultural practices) people bring to this issue?"

The Setting of the Case Study

The School District

This case study is set in the High Plains School District, located in a Rocky Mountain state, which includes the city of High Plains and several other communities.[1] A brief overview of the communities, the school district and the individuals involved will illustrate the factors that make High Plains different from other districts. The High Plains School District[2] is one of the largest school districts in the state, covering 494.25 square miles with 26,880 students enrolled in 1998 in 56 public schools. The residents of the city of High Plains, overall, are mostly of Anglo descent, fairly well educated and middle- to upper middle-class. Though High Plains (population equals approximately 90,000) is not an urban center and lacks much ethnic diversity, other aspects of Button et al.'s (1997) first factor, Urbanism/Social Diversity, still apply. For instance, High

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[1] All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the community, school district, and individuals.
[2] Statistical data retrieved from the State Department of Education's website.

Plains is a relatively affluent community and has strong social networks of GLBTQ individuals and organizations.

High Plains has a statewide reputation for being a liberal town. In 1973 High Plains was one of the first cities in the United States to add sexual orientation to its local non-discrimination policy. However, the amendment was repealed by popular vote the following year. Thirteen years later, in 1987, sexual orientation was put back into the local non-discrimination ordinance by popular vote, demonstrating that a majority of voting residents supported protections for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in the areas of employment, housing, and public accommodation.

In February 2000, High Plains city council members voted 9-0 to add "gender variance"[3] to the city's non-discrimination ordinance, thus extending legal protection to transgendered people. Only twenty-six other cities in the country, and one state, Minnesota, have similar measures (Currah & Minter, 1999). High Plains is now the first city in the state to explicitly protect transgendered people from discrimination. The City of High Plains is also one of two cities in the state that have a registry for domestic partnerships, including same-sex partnerships. High Plains also has many well-established businesses and other institutions that support GLBTQ residents. Thus, the community of High Plains has a relatively long history of supporting equal rights for GLBTQ people, has a high percentage of college-educated residents, and a well-established and well-organized GLBTQ community.

The school district subsumes not only the city of High Plains, which is the "district seat," but a diverse array of other communities ranging from small towns and mountain villages to semi rural farm lands and sprawling suburbias. The school district, as a whole, has slightly different demography from the community of High Plains. For instance, districtwide statistics are lower than the community of High Plains along the lines of (1) median family income ($46,208 for High Plains compared to $43,782 districtwide) and (2) persons 25 years or older with Bachelor's degrees (58.9% for High Plains compared to 42.1% districtwide) (Geostat, 1999). Race and ethnicity vary more by community with several small communities in the eastern part of the county having

[3] Gender variance is defined as "a persistent sense that one's gender identity is incongruent with one's biological sex."

larger Hispanic populations while others are predominantly Anglo. Several communities in the eastern part of the school district, mostly Anglo, have the reputation of being more conservative. Indeed, many of the parents who opposed the school district's policies that include sexual orientation live in the eastern part of the district.

The University

Another contributing factor to High Plains' liberal reputation is that the city is home to a large state university. Though the university has so far refused to add sexual orientation to its non-discrimination policy, it does recognize domestic partnerships for its students by allowing same-sex student couples to live in Student Family Housing and use the Health Care and Recreational Centers. The university has yet to grant domestic partner benefits to faculty and staff. The campus also has several student and faculty GLBTQ groups, a GLBT Resource Center and offers a certificate in LGBT Studies.

Populations and Sampling

My sampling was purposive and criterion-based (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) insofar as I selected individuals from the populations described below who were involved in and/or affected by the district policies in question because of the nature of their work (i.e., school personnel), or were involved because it was an issue that was personally important to them (i.e., community members).

High Plains Safe Schools Coalition

The High Plains Safe Schools Coalition (HPSSC) is a coalition of approximately seventeen individuals, including nine community members (three of whom are retired school teachers and two mothers of school-aged children), three school district employees, and two high school students, all Anglo (except one who is of east Asian descent), who have garnered the support of approximately six churches, a synagogue, the city's Human Relations Commission and other organizations like Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). Members are involved for various reasons, including being GLBTQ themselves, having a gay child, or simply sharing an understanding of the need to stop anti-gay abuse of students. The HPSSC has worked in numerous and varied ways in the community and the school district to advocate implementation and

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enforcement of the district's non-discrimination policy in regards to sexual orientation. I interviewed seven members of the HPSSC.

Concerned Citizens

At odds with the Safe Schools Coalition is a group of morally conservative parents who opposed the inclusion of sexual orientation in the district's non-discrimination policy and who organized in opposition to another policy, the Diversity Goal, wherein sexual orientation was included as a type of diversity. I interviewed four community members associated with Concerned Citizens. Other individuals I interviewed who opposed the policies are represented in the populations below. The archival data and videotaped school board meetings described below also provided a wealth of material from other individuals who opposed the policies but whom I did not personally interview.

District Staff

I interviewed four elementary teachers, four middle school teachers, and nine high school teachers for a total of seventeen teachers. I interviewed two former superintendents, four program directors in central administration, three principals, and three assistant principals for a total of twelve current and former administrators. I also interviewed five guidance counselors, two intervention specialists and three former and current school board members.

Only two teachers I interviewed openly expressed opposition to the inclusion of sexual orientation in the policies. Several other teachers, while claiming support for the policies, nonetheless expressed opposition to the inclusion of sexual orientation in the curriculum. No administrator I interviewed openly expressed opposition, which may be because they are expected to uphold school board policy. I do not take this to mean, however, that no administrator in the district privately opposes the policies. Most of the district staff I interviewed explicitly supported the policies.

Other Individuals

I also interviewed two attorneys who gave specialized legal opinions on this topic and two members of an Official Advisory Committee to the school board, Citizens United Against Racism (CUAR), that reports on

issues of equity for students of color. These individuals were identified through reputational case sampling. In total I interviewed 54 individuals for this case study.

Data Collection

Participant Observation

HPSSC meetings and HPSD school board meetings were the sites of my participant observation. I kept detailed field notes of the proceedings of these meetings and participated, as a member, in the HPSSC meetings. As a group member of High Plains Safe Schools Coalition, I also had access to the minutes of the meetings and was on the group's e-mail listserve.

Bias and researcher subjectivity were concerns here. I handled this by stating my biases up front. I am a gay man who suffered six years of abuse at the hands of my classmates, teachers, and even administrators from grades seven through twelve. I would like to end anti-gay bias in every US school so no other GLBTQ youth will ever have to go through what I went through. While interviewing Concerned Citizens, I took extra care to be very aware of my own subjectivities. I had the very real desire to understand the points of view and the rationales of those with whom I did not agree (i.e., opponents who believe that GLBTQ people and perspectives should not be included in all aspects of public schooling). This was not a difficult task for me and I allowed myself to be "steeped" in Concerned Citizens' logic to the point where it took a while for me step back from it and begin to see it objectively. This was a good learning experience and made this research stronger.

Semi-structured Interviews

I conducted face-to-face interviews with informants. The questions were open-ended thus facilitating answers that were unique to the individual's circumstances. My connections as a substitute teacher in the school district and with GLBTQ activists in the community proved useful in increasing support.

Archival Data: Document and Artifact Collection

Documents I collected included letters to the editor and other local newspaper clippings, internal documents of the High Plains Safe Schools Coalition detailing their history and activities as an organization, letters to district administrators and other public documents of the High Plains School District that pertain to the

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policies, and one document from Concerned Citizens recommending their proposed changes for the district's Diversity Goal. These written documents provided an historical and chronological picture of how public debate around the policies unfolded in the community and was handled by the school district.

Videotaped School Board Meetings

I reviewed videotaped school board meetings from the debates on the non-discrimination policy and the Diversity Goal, transcribed advocates', opponents', and school board members' comments, and identified potential informants to then interview. These videotapes are kept in the Superintendent's Office and are available for viewing by the public. The videotapes were extremely useful in my data analysis insofar as giving me a better sense of and portraying the "big picture" and worldviews from which individuals spoke.

Personal Journal

I kept a "reflexive journal" in which I carried on a conversation with myself to record insights, ideas, working hypotheses, unanswered questions, and uncertainties as they occurred to me. I wondered how my personal feelings on this topic would affect my involvement in and ability to analyze this research. In retrospect, my initial concerns about my ability to remain objective and that this research would be an emotional journey for me did not play out. Though I felt great passion and drive while conducting this research I was able to identify my reactions and remain balanced in my analysis and presentation of findings.

A Brief History of District and Community Support for GLBTQ Students' Rights

Since the early 1990's the district and school boards have been relatively supportive of GLBTQ students and staff, although the support has been largely unspoken until very recently. There were several reasons for this early support. Several GLBTQ employees, working as Program Directors in the district's central administration, offered teacher in-services that included GLBTQ student issues. Also, the then district Superintendent, Bruce, was a closeted gay man, who has since come out, and who worked covertly with GLBTQ advocates in the district. Under Bruce's tenure, the school board first added sexual orientation to a policy in 1992. This policy spelled out a protocol for students in filing complaints of discrimination based on "race, color, creed, marital status, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, or handicap." Sexual orientation

was slipped in at the last moment and the school board quietly adopted the policy without discussion. Subsequently, all but a few top administrators have forgotten about the policy. As far as I can tell, principals, teachers, and students never learned of the policy and no one ever utilized it to file a complaint.

In 1994 the district adopted its current non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation. This policy was adopted in the midst of controversy that helped to raise awareness not only about the policy but about the problem of anti-gay abuse in the schools. In early 1994 a group of GLBTQ staff, including Trisha, one of the Program Directors mentioned above, asked the school board to form a committee which would study for one year how to ensure that schools are safe and secure for GLBTQ students and to study if it would be possible to incorporate sexual orientation issues into the curriculum. Trisha reported, however, that the "Right Wing had got wind of what was going on and they had flyered and they had e-mailed and they were going to have their people there en masse." An emotional and somewhat violent debate ensued at the following board meeting with opponents from religious right organizations and the Boy Scouts of America protesting the possibility that GLBTQ issues might be added to the curriculum. One of the points both sides could agree on, however, was that no student should be subjected to peer harassment simply because they are perceived to be GLBTQ.

After the community input portion of the school board meeting, Colleen, the school board President who was also very conservative, explained that she saw both sides of the issue. Getting emotional and choking up, Colleen said that she has two brothers, one of whom is gay. She explained she is very fond of both of her brothers but also agrees schools should focus on academics and not discuss "social issues," like sexual orientation. Colleen opposed the inclusion of sexual orientation issues in the curriculum and, thus, did not want to form a committee to study it. Drawing on advocate's and opponent's agreement that no student should be subject to peer harassment in school, Colleen proposed a compromise to "prevent this [controversy] from going any further." She proposed a district non-discrimination policy that stated "The HPSD will not tolerate discrimination, harassment, or violence against anyone including students or teachers regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion and will encourage respect for all people." After some discussion, the policy was adopted. Trisha recounts

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> So it was really a coup, I think, for our group that Colleen did the thing of, "I have a gay brother" and "But I can't see putting this in the curriculum either. But what I hear you people saying is you don't want gay people hurt. So can't we make a policy to that effect?" And they went and they created the policy right there in the meeting, voted on it, and we were sitting there. I mean, it was very difficult emotionally to be in that room, it was so tense. But we were sitting there going, "Oh my God. They're writing a policy! We're getting a policy out of it, not a committee!" [laughing] And, "Okay, who cares about the curriculum stuff. That's gonna come later anyway." And the Right Wing people felt like they had won, like they had charged in there by God and they had "stopped them from doing this thing" and they were totally fine with the policy they came up with. And we just sat back sort of smirking going, "Okay, once it's in the policy, that's so much more than what we were asking for. We can really build on that. We can really take it and run." So, it was cool.

Subsequently, the non-discrimination policy was implemented in several ways, however inconsistent. Several administrators took the policy as encouragement to start offering more in-services on how to stop anti-gay peer harassment. The non-discrimination policy also appeared in a 1995 edition of the district's "Students' and Parents' Rights and Responsibilities" handbook. Even with these measures to implement the policy, however, many teachers and administrators remained unaware of the policy.

In 1998, four years after the High Plains school board adopted the non-discrimination policy, Dorothy, the President of the High Plains Safe Schools Coalition and a retired teacher in the district with "insider connections," says she "was appalled that nothing had changed" and that GLBTQ students were still being harassed in school. Thus, Dorothy and other members of the community formed the High Plains Safe Schools Coalition to advocate for implementation of the non-discrimination policy passed four years prior and to advocate for the inclusion of sexual orientation in the district's Diversity Goal adopted in 1999.

Opposed to the district's handling of sexual orientation issues, including the inclusion of sexual orientation in the policies, was Concerned Citizens. While this group bases their objections to homosexuality on religious grounds, their objections to the school district's handling of sexual orientation issues are not as simply characterized as being religious in nature. Rather, it is a libertarian stance, with values like government non-intervention and individual autonomy, that binds this group together. Frank, a parent who opposed the district's Diversity Goal statement regarding "valuing diversity," instead favored the language "respect diversity" because the school district shouldn't "tell people they have to value certain lifestyles." Frank explains, "The

policy said we have to value homosexuality. The government shouldn't tell us what to value. Schools should promote proper treatment for all people."

Findings From This Case: Strategies and Factors That Facilitated or Impeded the Work of the High Plains Safe Schools Coalition

The findings of this case study are in line with what Button et al. (1997) found to either facilitate or impede the adoption and implementation of gay rights legislation. The tactics employed by HPSSC, as well as factors that affected HPSSC's effectiveness, are revealed and discussed using as a framework Button et al.'s model and four factors of gay rights policy adoption.

Factor One: Urbanism/Social Diversity

Though the community of High Plains is not an urban center and is largely Anglo, this factor holds relevance for High Plains as a community that has historically had a well-organized GLBTQ community and where identity politics have played a large role in public debate and support of local gay rights public policy. Findings from this case are congruous with Button et al.'s Urbanism/Social Diversity factor. For one, High Plains is relatively affluent and affluent communities tend to support gay rights legislation more than do poorer communities (Button et al., 1997). Also, HPSSC was able to join forces with Citizens United Against Racism (CUAR), a community coalition of people of color, with whom they recognized a political commonality as oppressed peoples. Although there were at first concerns that CUAR's focus on equity for students of color would be overshadowed by a new focus on GLBTQ students,[4] the two groups have diligently worked with one another to better understand each other's positions. When asked about any lingering animosities that HPSSC might be "riding on the coattails" of CUAR, a CUAR member responded, "No, I haven't heard that. If some people make some progress then other people should be there making progress too. It's not a competition, social justice." CUAR and the HPSSC continue to work together and support one another's causes and recently co-sponsored a school board candidate forum regarding candidates' positions on educational equity for students of color and GLBTQ students.

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[4] For related discussions of tensions between people of color and GLBTQ people see (Anzaldúa, 1999) and (Boykin, 1996).

As is the case with High Plains School District in this study, Button et al. found a correlation between school districts that adopt policies that include sexual orientation with being a part of a community that previously adopted gay rights legislation at the local level. Button et al. explain "[I]t was not the legal statute itself that seemed to encourage efforts to address sexual orientation issues in schools, but the factors that produced a gay movement strong enough to get an ordinance passed" (pp. 152-153).

Factor Two: Political Opportunity

The HPSSC often took advantage of local popular opinion and other political opportunities, many of which were not predictable. One opportunity seized by the group was to work covertly with closeted GLBTQ administrators in garnering inside support and devising tactics for persuading the district to be inclusive of GLBTQ students. Also, the school board President, Colleen, reported that having a gay brother probably influenced her decision to propose the alternative non-discrimination policy that included sexual orientation.

Local popular opinion was swayed in their favor when the HPSSC secured the support of churches and a synagogue, community organizations, government officials, including a commissioner on the local Human Relations Commission, and a state senator. Dorothy, President of HPSSC, explains the group's strategy.

> One group alone shouldn't go into the district or they're perceived as a single interest group. When we named ourselves a coalition and included other groups, especially churches for broad based community support, that was key. You have to find your allies in the community and get them to write letters. Get religious organizations to sign on so the school board knows [you] have [support in] the community. You have to form a coalition; you can't do it as loners and lone rangers. Networking and working as allies, rather than adversaries, is important.

Two related strategies members of HPSSC have followed are to move slowly and win people over on a personal level. Through persistence and dialog the group has forged working relationships with the school district's Director of Institutional Equity and Multicultural Education, Program Directors in the district's central administration, the Superintendent and various school board members. A member of HPSSC explains, "I feel like with school policies it's better to sort of build slowly and not pick a necessarily revolutionary path so as to not alienate folks who would write us off as 'whackos'." HPSSC members constantly mention the best way to win support is one person at a time, opening dialog with people, "and then they'll listen to what your ideas are."

As a result of their patience and persistence, the HPSSC has come to be recognized as an entity in High Plains and is working on becoming an Official Advisory Committee on GLBTQ student issues to the school board.

Another political opportunity factor that has helped the HPSSC in its advocacy is the local university. The involvement of GLBTQ professors and college students (including myself), as well as GLBTQ university organizations, in HPSSC's efforts supports Button et al.'s contention that universities help foster climates supportive of GLBTQ rights. The county health department's GLBTQ youth support group also served as a resource for educating school officials and the community about the needs of GLBTQ students and the problem of anti-gay harassment in the schools. Regarding the recognition of GLBTQ student abuse as a problem, a principal explained, "When speakers from the [GLBTQ youth group] come in and talk, it helps legitimize it. There's an air of legitimacy to it that helps."

Finally, popular opinion was swayed by several unpredictable events which helped to raise awareness around the issue of oppression of GLBTQ people, including the passage of a 1992 statewide ballot initiative which sought to limit the rights of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals (and was ultimately declared "unconstitutional" by the US Supreme Court); the 1998 brutal beating death of Matt Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student; and the 1999 school shooting at Colombine High School in Littleton, Colorado where it was reported the gunmen were the victims of peer harassment that included anti-gay taunts. An administrator points out how certain events push this issue to the forefront saying "A lot of times what happens is, it's things occurred that bring us to revisit these things. They're usually grim reminders."

Factor Three: Resource Mobilization

Whereas Political Resources have more to do with characteristics external to the group, Resource Mobilization concerns characteristics internal to the group, for instance things that inspire the group, things that hold the group together, and other resources that allow the group to achieve its goals. Button et al. (1997) contend that one highly motivated individual often inspires the group. In the case of HPSSC, this individual is Dorothy, the President. Dorothy is described by other members of the group as "tireless," "passionate," "an activist who's come into her own right," and "a role model." Dorothy, a retired schoolteacher in the district, also

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has a good reputation with district officials and has many connections in high up places. She's developed a keen sense for just how much pressure to exert on individuals, sometimes by going to their superiors, to garner their support.

"Problem recognition" was the first task undertaken taken by HPSSC to document the problem of anti-gay peer abuse in the schools. The HPSSC presented trainings on GLBTQ student needs at work sessions of the school board, inviting GLBTQ students to tell their stories of abuse, and gave school board members Certificates of Completion to let them know they were appreciated. The HPSSC regularly presents updates at school board meetings and e-mails information on the topic to school board members and the Superintendent.

The HPSSC also identified "program advocates" within the district, such as the Director of Institutional Equity and Multicultural Education with whom the HPSSC works closely. Also, two members of HPSSC are Program Directors in the district's central administration. Working with these inside advocates gave the HPSSC entrée into the district's central administration, navigating the bureaucracy with tips from the inside advocates. The HPSSC then began to convince other district officials of the "effectiveness" of implementing the non-discrimination policy through teacher in-services that address GLBTQ issues in general and anti-gay peer abuse in particular. On the most part, district staff said they support the "spirit of the policy" but many remain unsure of exactly what the policy says and what it requires of them in their job positions. Thus, in-services are required to help teachers and other staff understand their roles in implementing the policy. However, anti-gay attitudes on the part of some district staff and community members continue to hinder the implementation and enforcement of the policy. Time and money, as well, have proven to be a barrier to implementing the policy to the extent HPSSC would like it to be implemented.

Factor Four: Communal Protest

Though High Plains has a history of support for GLBTQ rights, which probably made it easier for the HPSSC to garner support in the district and community, there has still been a fair amount of contention over the inclusion of sexual orientation in the district's policies. Besides tending to areas of resistance in the district's administration and staff, the HPSSC has had to contend with morally conservative parents in the district who

see the inclusion of sexual orientation in the district's policies as the district's official promotion and legitimation of homosexuality and a violation of their right to believe that homosexuality is wrong.

Where the findings of this case most differ from those of Button et al. (1997), as well as others (Swan, 1997), are that opponents in this case cite libertarian values more than religious reasons for opposing the policy. These beliefs, though religious at base, all reflect core libertarian themes of government non-intervention and parental autonomy. Many opponents believe the policies infringe on their 1st Amendment rights of freedom of conscience and speech. Members of this group believe the topic of sexual orientation is a social issue and that social issues should be the exclusive domain of the family and their church. Concerned Citizens report feeling slighted by the school district and feel that their rights as parents are being violated. Carl, another parent, asserts, "Most of the parents, once they said their piece and lost,[5] have basically given up. I hear more of that group threatening to pull their kids [out of public school]. They're fed up." Frank, expressing his frustration with feeling like his rights, as a parent, are not being acknowledged exclaims, "It seems okay to discriminate against Christians."

Fraser (1999) concurs this is a common sentiment expressed by moral conservatives nationwide. He states, they "tend to feel discriminated against... They feel modernity is against them—in matters dealing with sex, crime, pornography, education... many felt themselves to be victims of 'anti-Christian bigotry'" (p. 186). Carol, a parent who is a devout Mormon, agrees. In her discussions with school officials she explains, "I've felt a feeling of condescension that because I'm trying to live a moral life in accordance with my conscience and the outlines that God has given in the scriptures that I'm some kind of a narrow minded bigot." Of main importance to this group is the sense that the school district is undermining their right as parents to instill in their children their anti-gay beliefs. They believe that the schools are promoting a social agenda that puts homosexuality in, at most, a positive light, and at least, a neutral light. Thus, this group can be characterized as opposing any district or state intervention that would challenge or override their attempts to instill in their children their religious belief that homosexuality is wrong.

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[5] The school board voted to retain the language "value diversity" in its Diversity Goal, despite the requests of opponents to change it to "respect diversity."

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Though advocates of the policy hold that "the policy is about changing behaviors, not beliefs," Concerned Citizens and teachers who oppose the policies continue to complain they feel they cannot hold their own beliefs because the policies mandate that everyone must agree that homosexuality is okay. William, a middle school teacher who opposes the policies, speaks to opponents' charge that the policies are the result of "political correctness" and tell people what to think. He explains

> I don't feel like people are allowed to have their own feelings about anything anymore. Everybody is supposed to feel the same, everybody is supposed to react the same. I grew up a totally unbigoted bone in my body. I didn't know what bigotry was. I moved to cities and started hearing things and being around things and discovered there are, how should I say?--people say that, well, um you're stereotyping a race or you're stereotyping a sex or you're stereotyping a religion and yet when you get around people in a long-term situation, around people in certain categories, you find that the majority of people that are in that particular category actually have a lot of those stereotypes. That's fine. But don't tell me that I have to like that group of people the same as I like this group of people. I have different feelings and I'm not necessarily going to like them all the same. So if I don't like the people who are stereotypical of this group and I don't like this stereotypical attitude I probably won't be around the people from that gender, race, sex, whatever that fits those stereotypical categories. I will be around people who are normal people and don't necessarily fit those categories in there. But I will basically avoid that group. When I was in college I had a friend who was black and we got along great all the time until he got with his black friends and then I was a nobody, I was a honkey white, and he turned black. He wasn't just a person. I had trouble with that. Why could we be friends together but we couldn't be friends when you're around your other friends? And so I got to not like certain parts of things. Yet I feel with political correctness, I'm not allowed to not like those parts. I feel like I have to like everybody the same all the time. I'm sorry, nobody does. I'm allowed to have differences of opinion but I don't feel with political correctness we're allowed to.

Thus, William feels that people no longer have the right to dislike others and express that dislike or they risk being immediately labeled as a racist, a homophobe or a bigot. For him, the inability to express his opinions because of fear of being labeled a racist or a bigot is the same as not being able to hold an opinion privately. Opponents, as a group, felt that the policies are forcing them to agree it's okay to be gay.

During the promotion and adoption of the policies, advocates claimed the policies were intended to do nothing more than to promote safety and to stop anti-gay peer harassment. However, advocates are generally reticent to concede that, in the long run, policies like this probably contribute to greater social acceptance of homosexuality. Concerned Citizens told me they sense this sea change in public attitude towards homosexuality and herein lies the source of their opposition.

In the case of High Plains, both advocates and opponents of the policy rightly expressed their desires that no student should be subject to harassment in school for any reason. Concerned Citizen's main contention is that they see the inclusion of the term "sexual orientation" in any school policy as evidence of that school's promotion and legitimation of homosexuality, to which they are vehemently opposed. What they mean by promotion and legitimation of homosexuality is that homosexuality is portrayed in a neutral or positive fashion, thus, positioning it as being equal to, or as good as, heterosexuality. Carol, a Concerned Citizen and devout Mormon, explains, "I do not want anyone telling [my children] that this is an alternative lifestyle that is acceptable and okay and just another choice. That's the bottom line."

Though the policy states nothing about teaching that homosexuality is acceptable or as good as heterosexuality, opponents believe the mere fact that the district has taken a stance to prohibit anti-gay peer harassment, and states in policy that all forms of diversity (including sexual orientation differences) should be valued, in turn sends an implicit message that "It's okay to be gay." Parents who do not want their children to receive, either implicitly or explicitly, the message "It's okay to be gay," feel that their right to instill in their children the belief that homosexuality is wrong is being undermined by the school district.

This situation puts morally conservative parents in the difficult position of having the school undermine their parental authority. It also puts their children in a difficult position because they receive conflicting messages, at home and in school, about the acceptability of homosexuality. Morally conservative parents worry that the schools are sending the message to their children that, "Your parents are wrong." Parents do not want to look like bigots or hate mongers to their children or to others. Carol says she doesn't hate gays. She goes on to explain:

> I have deep compassion for gay and lesbian people and I don't think it does them any good to say that this is normal and good when I know in my heart of hearts that it's a hard life and that it's wrong. And with some effort and true knowledge there can be healing and change and repentance and they can be made whole.

Though opponents, like Carol, sometimes have good intentions and they are rightly concerned with preserving their rights and freedoms, GLBTQ students also have rights and freedoms to be protected. The right

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of conservative parents to not look like bigots does not supersede the right of GLBTQ students to be safe in school.

Discussion and Analysis

The findings from this case are largely congruent with Button et al.'s four factors that affect gay rights policy adoption. The HPSSC effectively managed many local factors, such as opposition from Concerned Citizens and Citizens United Against Racism, which at first presented challenges to effect change. Because they were well-organized and had established connections with district officials, the HPSSC was poised to take advantage of other local factors, many of which were unpredictable, such as the election of a new and more liberal school board with whom HPSSC quickly forged trusting relationships. The strategies employed by the HPSSC that I have highlighted here can help other community-based coalitions avoid pitfalls and employ more effective strategies to work towards safe and equitable schools for GLBTQ students in their own districts. Communal protest from moral conservatives, however, continues to impede the work of the HPSSC and related groups.

As the case of High Plains has shown, without a clear policy and top-down support to enforce it there is little or no incentive for principals and teachers to take time out of an already busy school day to address anti-gay peer harassment when it happens. Furthermore, teachers and administrators have good reason to fear morally conservative parent groups whose tactics often jeopardize their job security. Teachers and principals have a professional responsibility and an ethical requirement to stop anti-gay abuse, however. At a 1998 news conference, National Education Association President Bob Chase declared, "The NEA strongly agrees that no child should be subject to harassment or discrimination… schools have a responsibility to teach respect for others, regardless of race, color, creed, or sexual orientation" (Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network, 1998b).

Thus, school districts should adopt non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity and should provide adequate in-services to staff at all levels to help them understand what the policies require of them. School districts should invite local GLBTQ organizations and GLBTQ youth groups to

teach staff about sexual orientation differences, which can help staff to more effectively serve their GLBTQ students and students with GLBTQ parents. Finally, though the inclusion of sexual orientation in district policy or curricula may imply "It's okay to be gay," thus making it more difficult for morally conservative parents to teach their children homosexuality is wrong, this is not sufficient reason to deny equality of educational opportunity to GLBTQ students and families. The right of morally conservative parents to teach their children homosexuality is wrong does not extend into the classroom. All students' identities should be respected within the classrooms and hallways of America's schools. To avoid hypocrisy, moral conservatives must not demand that their religious identities deserve more respect than the identities of others. Howe (1997) explains

> non-oppression is rooted in the requirements of democracy. It must be both applied to and observed by all who make up a political community, which is to say it must be reciprocal. The problem with... Christian fundamentalist reformers is that they refuse to embrace reciprocity. They are cultural imperialists who want recognition only for themselves. (pp. 71-72)

I do concede, however, that as a secondary consequence the inclusion of sexual orientation in school policies probably helps legitimate and promote homosexuality as being as good as and/or equal to heterosexuality in the mind of students. It does not promote one over the other, but puts them on equal ground. Even so, raising homosexuality to the same level of social acceptance as heterosexuality does not violate the principle of government neutrality but ensures it, in that all students, GLBTQ and straight alike, are assured equality of educational opportunities. Thus, opponents' claims of "special rights" are untenable. Simply including sexual orientation and gender identity in district policies and talking about homosexuality in class, to the extent that heterosexuality is already discussed, does not force anyone to "value homosexuality." People are free to hold whatever beliefs they want about homosexuality. People may not, however, silence those with whom they disagree. All students have 1st Amendment rights to freedoms of conscience and expression (Gathercoal, 1996; Imber & van Geel, 2001). The district's policies do not limit those rights, but ensure them for GLBTQ students and religious students alike. All students are free to share their personal beliefs, religious or otherwise, with other students in school as long as it is done in a manner that does not create an intimidating or hostile environment (United States Department of Education, 2000).

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Schools that have implemented policies and programs that provide safety and support for GLBTQ students have shown that this type of policy, along with its enforcement, can raise awareness about democratic principles like equality, creates a more positive learning environment, and gives teachers and administrators "the letter of the law" to stop anti-gay peer abuse (Buckel, 2000; Harbeck, 1994; Lipkin, 1999; Owens, 1998; Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). Furthermore, challenging heterosexist norms benefits all students in that it lessens the stigma around differences in sexual orientation (Herek, 1998) and gender identity (Blumenfeld, 1992), which confine everybody to rigid gender role stereotypes. Hopefully, other communities can learn from the example of High Plains how best to work for adoption and implementation of non-discrimination and other policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity in their own school districts.

Future Directions

There needs to be a dialog in the primary literature about where we go from here. Academics are in a prime position to lend their expertise to community groups like the High Plains Safe Schools Coalition, to research issues of GLBTQ student equity, and to incorporate these issues in their education courses, especially for pre-service teachers. Also, the descriptive nature of qualitative research makes it well-suited for helping the audience to understand the deep meanings of such contentious public debates.

The efforts of the HPSSC in advocating GLBTQ student equity point to the need for (1) reaching common philosophical ground between advocates and opponents (I have chosen democratic and social justice principles, with which everyone should agree), (2) exercising patience and persistence, and (3) human interaction in the form of dialog. Gutmann and Thompson (1996) contend

> moral debate in politics can reveal new possibilities and suggest new directions, making realization of the principles more feasible than was previously thought. Because deliberation has the potential for improving collective understandings of liberty and opportunity, the conditions of deliberation are an indispensable part of any perspective committed to securing liberty and opportunity for all. (p. 224)

Let us continue this discussion to raise awareness about the need for inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in educational policies and curricula and the extension of equal rights to GLBTQ students.

Background of Presenter

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